
UNIT 26 AN INTRODUCTION TO THE INDIAN NOVEL IN ENGLISH

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26.0 OBJECTIVES

In this first unit of the block dealing with *Sunlight on a Broken Column* by Attia Hosain (pub. 1961), we shall introduce you to

- the Indian novel in English from a historical perspective
- the socio-cultural background of the novel '*Sunlight on a Broken Column*'
- some important Indian novelists in English and, in passing refer you to other novels you could read if this novel has interested you.

At the end of this Unit we hope you will be able to read the novel *Sunlight on a Broken Column* with greater appreciation of the themes and issues involved. You should also be able to

- list the important novels and novelists of Indian writing in English
- list the important features of '*Sunlight on a Broken Column*' and its culture-specific aspects, and
- discuss the chief aspects of the entire field of the Indian novel in English—its important practitioners and the novels which are landmarks in this field.

26.1 INTRODUCTION

Historically, Indian writing in English dates back only to the 1830's. At this time, the Orientalists and the Anglicists were still unable to decide which language the government should aid and promote. Though Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit were strong contenders for this favour, ultimately the proponents of English won the day. Meanwhile, the British themselves and their ladies were recording India for posterity - through diaries, "letters home", the occasional novel, gazettes and land-records etc. Indians did begin writing in English in the nineteenth century but women, particularly Muslim, were not prominently represented among the authors.

26.2 EARLY WRITINGS OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Initially, those Indians who wrote in English primarily were concerned with the communication of ideas about the reform of Indian society and Hindu religion. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Telang of the *Prarthna Samaj* and Swami Ramakrishna Paramahansa covered legal, literary, educational, social, religious and political problems in their writings.

26.2.1 Printing Press

The Christian missionaries were chiefly interested in religious propaganda. The printing press proved useful to this enterprise. But in addition to religious texts, grammars and encyclopedias and a profusion of other books both in the vernacular and in English were also printed. The press catered to the demand of the reading public. First the British and then the Indians themselves dealt with "Anglo-India today, its characteristics - imperialistic but isolated, discriminately hospitable, its monotony, its snobbery, its melancholy, its conservatism..", (Bhupal Singh; *A Survey of Anglo-Indian Fiction*, 1934). Thus printing, from its religious beginnings became more secular and covered a whole range of subjects.

26.2.2 Themes of Indian Writing in English

The people who wrote during this time were both the Indians writing in English and the British writing about India and their experiences of it. Both British and Indian writers wrote of mixed marriages, Eurasian life and Indian politics. In keeping with the British reputation for maintaining records, we find they kept diaries, described events in letters home, wrote tracts and pamphlets.

Since theme was such a major preoccupation with these writers, they did not pay much attention to technique. Neither was the reading public much interested in the "how" of a piece of writing - it was more interested in the vast field of knowledge that Indian writing in English was opening up.

26.2.3 The Beginning of the Novel in Bengal

For a variety of historical reasons, it was in Bengal that the Indian novel first made its appearance. Some of the novelists like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee wrote in Bengali and then translated into English *The Lake of Palms* (1902) and *The Slave-Girl of Agra* (1909). Some propagated the English language and its utility and then wrote tracts in it. Other names worth remembering include Raj Lakshmi Devi, Toru Dutt, Kali Krishna Lahiri, H. Dutt and Khetrapal Chakravarthi.

The three stages that the novel of Bengal went through were re-echoed throughout India.

The *first* stage, in Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's time (1838-1894), was a preoccupation with the restoration of self-respect. The *second* stage, in Rabindranath Tagore's (1861-1941) time, was the problem of bridging the gap between the East and the West. This preoccupation with interpretation of the clash of cultures, of the East-West encounter has continued well into the closing years of this present century. The *third*, or final, stage according to Srinivasa Iyengar dealt with identification and exploration of themes that would interest the common man.

26.2.4 Another perspective

Another way of looking at the themes of the Indian novel in English is that proposed by Meenakshi Mukherjee. The three categories she has identified are the historical romance, the novel of social or political realism and the psychological novel. While the romances were mainly imitative, the prose works and the novels that dealt with social or political realism were innovative (in their themes only).

Attia Hosain's novel could be considered to be a novel of socio-cultural realities prevalent in Nawabi circles around the time of the partition of India (1947). However, before she came on the scene, novelists were concerned with social uplift, the freedom struggle, a projection of Indian's glorious past etc.

Exercise 1

Describe the three stages of the early Indian novel in English. (30 words)

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26.3 EARLY YEARS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Early critical works on "Indo-Anglian" literature, make no distinction between the writings of Indians and of the British about India. However, the term "Indo-Anglian" used till the nineteen eighties clearly refers to the writings of Indians in English. Works in translation are not covered by this term. Some critics even use the term "Indo-English" to refer to English translations of works written originally in other Indian languages.

For our purpose, we shall use the term "Indian Writing in English" to avoid any type of confusion.

26.3.1 The Beginning of this Century

The early Indian writers of this century who attempted fiction in English wrote about Anglo-India, specifically about the social and cultural interactions between the two races, the Indians and the British. Take for example, S.M. Mitra's *Hindupore: A peep behind the Indian unrest: an Anglo-Indian romance* (1909) and Sarat Kumar Ghosh's *The Prince of Destiny* (1909). The title of the first is self-explanatory. The second is neither a historical novel nor a mere romance. The theme here is the East-West encounter. There were several novels in English which were translations of novels written originally in English. The novels of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Romesh Chander Dutt fall in this category. Sardar Jogender Singh (*Nur Jahan*) alone produced a novel written originally in English.

With the improvement in the means of communication and in social awareness, the writers who appeared may be said to be the actual predecessors of the Indian novel in English. T. Ramakrishna's *Padmini* (1903) and *The Dive for Death* (1912), R.C. Dutt's *The Slave Girl of Agra* (1905) and *The Lake of Palms* (1909), S.K. Ghosh's *The Prince of Destiny: the New Krishna* (1909) deal with life in the United Provinces and Bengal.

26.3.2 The Twenties Onward

Tagore's *The Home and the World* (1919) and *Four Chapters* (1934), cover the revolutionary movements of this century. Of the thirties, we have K.S. Venkataramani's *Kandan the Patriot* (1932), *Murugan the Tiller* (1927) and Raj Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938).

At this point appear the 'Big Three' - Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan.

26.4 THE 'BIG THREE'

Upto this point Indian writing in English did not have a clear focus. Attempts were sporadic and of interest to the casual reader of fiction. However, with the coming of the second phase of Indian writing in English, humanistic ideas find expression in the works of the first of the Big Three, Mulk Raj Anand.

26.4.1 Mulk Raj Anand

While Anand was aware of contemporary politics and this awareness does permeate his novels, basically he was a protagonist of social change. His work *Untouchable* (1935) deals with a day in the life of a sweeper boy. *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937) focuses on the exploitation of coolies on tea plantations. *The Big Heart* (1945) is about the lives of

coppersmiths and *Gauri or the Old Woman and the Cow* (1960) poignantly outlines the relative unimportance of a girl vis-a-vis a cow. The problems of construction labour form the subject of *The Road* (1961).

26.4.2 Raja Rao

Raja Rao is not as prolific as Anand but his innovations in narrative technique are equally noteworthy. In *Kanthapura* (1938) Rao presents the impact of Gandhian ideas on South Indian villages. In *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960) and *The Cat and Shakespeare* (1965) also he employs innovative narrative techniques. The first "defied the discipline of reviewers' word limits" since it was so complex. However, the protagonist Rama's four year stay in Europe helped him to realize what India meant to him and the philosophic digressions form the body of the novel. In the second, the reader finds "story, excitement and entertainment and the reader must learn the way of the Kitten who knows its mother cat is always around to pick it up when it falls".

26.4.3 R.K. Narayan

The last but not the least of the three landmark figures is R.K. Narayan whose primary purpose is to tell a tale. Using straight narrative, there are no unexpected tricks in his story telling. His protagonists are simple—boys who are poor in studies, painters of signs and social workers. Narayan has been in the tradition of the mainstream story-tellers who write primarily to entertain, as compared to those with didactic, philosophical or political designs on the reader.

Exercise 2

Who were the Big Three ? Why do you think this name was given to them?

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26.4.4. Other Important Contemporary Writers

Other important writers include Bhabhani Bhattacharya (*So Many Hungers* (1947), *Music for Mohini* (1952), and *He who Rides a Tiger* (1954). Manohar Malgaonkar in his *Distant Drums* (1960), *Combat of Shadows* (1962), *The Princes* (1963) and *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964) reveals an interest in history, both contemporary and past. He has also written potboilers like *A Spy in Amber* (1971), *Shalimar* and *Open Season*. The interesting thing about his novels is his pro-British perspective, unusual among Indian writers of fiction.

G.V. Desani's *All About H. Hatterr: A Gesture* (1949) is the story of Hatterr, half Malayan and half European. He "journeys through life cutting across classes, professions and continents" (Iyengar). It is a unique piece of writing, not equalled by any other writer of this school and in fact, not even replicated by Desani himself.

(For a further coverage you may consult the bibliography given at the end of this block).

26.5 THREE FAMOUS WOMEN WRITERS

The three names that are in the forefront among the women writers are Nayantara Sehgal, Anita Desai and Kamala Markandaya.

26.5.1 Nayantara Sehgal

Politics is the forte of Nayantara Sehgal. Born into a political family, her mother being the sister of Jawaharlal Nehru, may have a lot to do with her choice of themes. *A Time to be Happy* (1957) and *This Time of Morning* (1965) deal with politics, the Congress, Delhi and the 'corridors of power'. *A Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) is again a political novel but her field is contemporary Indian politics, not the 'East-West' encounter or historical romance.

26.5.2 Anita Desai

In Anita Desai's novels, the psychological takes precedent over the sociological. Here the 'climate of sensibility' is more important than the 'physical geography or the visible action' (Iyengar). In her two novels *Cry the Peacock* (1963) and *Voices in the City* (1965), Desai has carved out a niche for herself. *Cry the Peacock* is a very compelling novel exploring the disturbed mind of the protagonist Maya. The novel ends with the suicide of Maya. *Voices in the City* presents Calcutta, 'the city of noises and muffled voices'. *Bye-bye Blackbird* (1971) deals with the East-West encounter, the blackbird being a homing bird.

26.5.3 Kamala Markandaya

Markandaya has written ten novels to date but her early novels, *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), *Some Inner Fury* (1955) and *Silence of Desire* (1960) are more readable than her later ones, *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977) and *Pleasure City* (1982). The reason seems two-fold, one is her increasing alienation from India and issues relevant to it (she lives in England). The second is her concentration on refining her technique. Increasingly slick, the stories are set in some fictitious land of feudal India and five-star cultures.

26.5.4 Other important women novelists

Ruth Praver Jhabvala, though not an Indian, is preoccupied with the sleaze of India, its lower-middle class clerks, its shoe-string budget tourists, its ageing maharajahs and its 'holy cows'. But her perceptions, albeit leaving the reader uncomfortable, are uncanny and sharply accurate. Santha Rama Rao's only novel *Remember the House* (1956), Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli* and Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) are all have the house as a central metaphor. Other writers include Shashi Deshpande, Bharati Mukherjee and, among the potboiler writers, Shobha De.

Exercise 3

Briefly list the most important women writers of Indian English fiction.

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26.6 THE CURRENT DECADES

Most of the novelists mentioned in this unit are still writing. Chaman Nahal, Arun Joshi, Salman Rushdie of *Midnight's Children* fame, Shiv K. Kumar, Raji Narasimhan, Shashi Tharoor and Shashi Deshpande are also worth looking out for. Lately Bharati Mukherjee has been prominently published in India *Jasmine*, *The Tiger's Daughter*, *The Wife*.

Indian writing in English is now coming into its own. The self-conscious experimentation with technique or the innovative perceptions of themes have blended into an eminently readable form.

26.7 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit we introduced you to the Indian novel in English, covering the period from the 1830's to the present day. We introduced you to the three most important novelists in this area and provided you thumb-nail sketches of their themes. We also told you about the Indian women who were/are writing novels in English and briefly mentioned their works. (In case you are interested, you can read more of such novels). The exercises incorporated were meant to help you see for yourself how much you have comprehended what you were reading. In the next Unit, let us turn to *Sunlight on a Broken Column*.

26.8 ANSWERS TO EXERCISES

1. The restoration of self respect; the problem of bridging the gap between the East and the West; and identification and exploration of the common man, his problems and interest.
2. The Big Three were R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. They are the most influential of Indian writing novels in English, hence the name.
3. Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande, Bharati Mukherjee